

Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher

Moscow, September 23, 1989

[...]

Thatcher: I know that it is not easy to carry out political reform. You began to implement the reform from above, and it would be impossible otherwise. Here, as I understand it, you are in full control of the situation. But to carry out economic reform is even more difficult; I know this from my own experience. When economic reform starts, at first people find it hard psychologically to adjust to it, and so here one needs to make great efforts to persuade them, to overcome conscious or instinctive resistance, to teach them new things. But one also needs to be demanding, so that everybody would bear his part of the burden. This is why we support your reform from the bottom of our hearts, and we are ready to provide you such assistance that is within our means. We welcome your goal to achieve economic prosperity for your great country for the benefit of your own people and people abroad.

You have now reached the stage where every new step is more difficult than the previous one. It is important for people to see results, even though it is a politically ungratifying task. For instance, I had to wait for two years before the first results. All that time I was criticized, and when the success came it was received as something natural, and nobody thanked me. And how much time will you need to achieve first results? Two years or less?

Gorbachev: I will answer your question. But first of all, I would like to say the following. The absolute majority of our society supports perestroika. However, there are critical voices both on the right and on the left.

The right thinks approximately like this: since perestroika's progress is difficult, complicated, we should slow it down, and temporarily bring back the old methods, so that we could use them to solve the problems. If we were talking about simply using some means while keeping the tempo of the forward movement, I would not exclude using some portion of administrative methods. However, those who argue in favor of [old methods] have in mind to break the forward movement itself, to bury perestroika. But they cannot say it openly, because people will not give up perestroika. If you put the issue this way, then the administrative system is a dead end, it has exhausted itself. Maybe in the past it produced some results, and we have to see that also, but in today's society it is unacceptable, and we reject it.

[...]

Thatcher: But you need to teach the people to live day by day, not on future credits.

Gorbachev: We are teaching--teaching with life.

If you add to what we have just said the fact that these processes are unfolding in a country with 120 nationalities and ethnicities, you can imagine what a tight knot all the problems together present. As you know, the CC CPSU Plenum which has just ended analyzed the issues of inter-ethnic relations in depth. The Plenum's resolutions are very important. Their essence is to balance the nationalities policy, to rejuvenate the Soviet federation and to fill it with real meaning. I will tell you honestly, until now our state has been considered a federal one only formally, but in reality everything worked like in a typical unitary state--from the top down. The decisions of this Plenum are supposed to change that, to create mechanisms which in practice would help to remove tensions from inter-ethnic relations without interfering with the basic interests of individuals, nationalities, and society in the economic, cultural, and other spheres. Otherwise, inter-ethnic tensions could bury perestroika. This is how the issue stands now.

I would also like to state openly the following thought. Sometimes I hear, even here in the West: Why do we have to open up so many fronts simultaneously? But how can you reform the economy without reforming the political system? It will not work. And we already have the sad experiences of Khrushchev, and Kosygin with Brezhnev. How can you reform both the economy and politics without democratizing society, without glasnost, which incorporates individuals into an active socio-political life? That will not work either. How can you make prognoses and form healthy inter-ethnic relations separately from the economic, political, and democratic reforms in society as a whole? How can you carry out perestroika itself without rejuvenating the party?

All these issues are inseparably linked, and that is why we are saying that perestroika is not just a reform, it is a genuine revolution, our second socialist revolution. And we are making great efforts to carry it out.

[...]

Thatcher: I would like to raise the issue of the situation in the countries of Eastern Europe. I was very impressed by the courage and patriotism of General Jaruzelski in Poland. For you, of course, the future of Poland and its alliance with you has great significance. I noted that you calmly accepted the results of the elections in Poland and, in general, the processes in that country and in other East European countries. I understand your position in the following way: you are in favor of each country choosing its own road of development so long as the Warsaw Treaty is intact. I understand this position perfectly.

Now I would like to say something in a very confidential manner, and I would ask you not to record this part of the conversation.

Gorbachev: As you like.

(The following part of the conversation is recorded by A.S. Chernyaev immediately after the conversation.)

Thatcher: We are very concerned with the processes that are underway in East Germany. It is on the verge of big changes, which are being caused by the situation in that society and to some extent by Erich Honecker's illness. The thousands of people who are escaping from the GDR to the FRG are the primary example. All that is the external side of things, and it is important for us; but another issue is even more important.

Britain and Western Europe are not interested in the unification of Germany. The words written in the NATO communiqué may sound different, but disregard them. We do not want the unification of Germany. It would lead to changes in the post-war borders, and we cannot allow that because such a development would undermine the stability of the entire international situation and could lead to threats to our security.

We are not interested in the destabilization of Eastern Europe or the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty either. Of course, the internal changes are apt in all the countries of Eastern Europe, but in some countries they are more pronounced, in some countries not yet. However, we are in favor of those processes remaining strictly internal; we will not interfere in them and spur the decommunization of Eastern Europe. I can tell you that this is also the position of the U.S. president. He sent a telegram to me in Tokyo in which he asked me to tell you that the United States would not undertake anything that could threaten the security interests of the Soviet Union, or that could be perceived by Soviet society as a threat. I am fulfilling his request.

Gorbachev: Thank you for the information. In general, you formulated our position correctly. We think that the socialist countries should make their own decisions about their internal affairs; they should be able to choose which road to take, and at which tempo, in implementing their socialist choice. We do not want to, and we will not, interfere in these processes; but we were, of course, helping, and we shall be helping our friends and allies. As far as Erich Honecker's health is concerned, he is planning to participate in all the events commemorating the 40th anniversary of the GDR. I can inform you that I am planning to visit the GDR on October 6 and 7 for the celebration of the anniversary.

Thatcher: Thank you. The confidential part of my talk is over; you may now resume recording.

I suggest we move to the arms control issues. Where should we start?

Gorbachev: Wherever you would like. I will follow your choice.

Thatcher: Let's start then with the Vienna talks. They had a very good start. Since July, the Western draft, which we call "the Bush amendments," is on the negotiating table. As I understand, your letter, which you sent to G. Bush with E.A. Shevardnadze, contains new detailed Soviet proposals on conventional arms. I would be interested to know about them, although Bush informed me about them in general terms.

Gorbachev: I suspect that he informed you. But to what extent and in what tone? It became almost a tradition in our conversations to compare how the Americans present our position to you, and what it looks like in all fullness and nuance from our mouths. I think it is useful for both of us.

Thatcher: Yes, that is so. However, I would like to talk about conventional weapons a little later. Now I would mention that chemical disarmament is among both your and Bush's main priorities. We expect that he will speak about it in his UN speech. It turned out to be a very complicated problem. For some time, we had an impression that we would be able to achieve a convention on a complete ban on chemical weapons rather quickly. But now we are finding that it will take time. In this case, apparently, it is expedient to move by taking non-global steps, which would bring us closer to the ultimate goal. First of all, we have to perfect the inspection mechanism, although I understand that there is no such thing as absolutely perfect inspections. For example, there is the promising proposal of foreign inspections of chemical storage facilities on which Baker and Shevardnadze agreed. Overall, the issues of storage of chemical weapons are complicated and dangerous. I am not talking about the binary weapons, components of which can be stored safely.

Gorbachev: You know better, you are a chemist by education.

Thatcher: You don't need to be a chemist here, it is a political issue. The question is about how to choose the right route to the complete ban on chemical weapons. As far as I know, the United States will still need eight to ten months to complete the drafting of its position with all the nuances. And the problem here is not in trying to drag out the time, but in technological difficulties. The United States, as all of us, wants a ban on chemical weapons, but such [a ban] that would strengthen security. That is why they devote such attention to issues of control and inspections. I was told that the Bush administration is planning to propose to the Soviet Union a bilateral agreement, the essence of which would be that both sides would announce the size of their chemical weapons arsenal and pledge to reduce it to the "insurance level" equal to 20% of the current US stockpile. Such an agreement would be accompanied with various forms of control and inspections, including inspections on demand. At the same time, both sides would step up their efforts to achieve a global ban on chemical weapons.

Gorbachev: Thank you. The issue of chemical weapons will be very important in the Baker-Shevardnadze negotiations. Let's see what they agree on. But I would like to say that we value our cooperation with Britain on chemical weapons very highly and would like to continue it. Let us agree to have another round of consultations between our experts. We don't want to simplify this issue. It is quite complicated. But if all main military powers make efforts to ban these weapons, I am confident that we will be successful.

Thatcher: I am also in favor of continuing our contacts. However, Britain is in a different situation than either the United States or the Soviet Union. We destroyed our chemical weapons

back in 1958. Our stockpile contained mainly mustard gas. It would be interesting to see, how we destroyed it then, and what impact it had on the environment. I think we need to order British experts to look into the history of this issue. If we find something interesting, I will share it with you.

In a more general sense, we are very interested in banning these weapons. Our course of thinking is approximately the following. Today there are no less than 15 countries in the world that possess the technology of ballistic missile production. If those missiles are equipped with warheads filled with chemical, or for that matter, bacteriological weapons, I do not need to say what kind of danger it would represent to all of us. Therefore, we will do everything possible to obtain a global ban on chemical weapons with reliable international monitoring. Monitoring is the most difficult issue, and we intend to work on improving the methods, including together with you.

In this sphere, the methods of destroying chemical weapons and monitoring of it are very important. As I know, you encountered great difficulties in building a plant for destruction of chemical weapons in Chapayevsk. Is it true that this project was put on hold following demands of your “greens?”

Gorbachev: Yes, our “greens” are very actively against this project. I do not know how it will develop, but we have a strong intention to destroy all chemical weapons with maximum care of the state of environment. This is also one of the issues that our experts could discuss.

Thatcher: Let’s keep all aspects of chemical disarmament in our minds. At the present moment I hope that the negotiations between Baker and Shevardnadze will be completed to the satisfaction of all the sides.

Gorbachev: You have an excellent information service, Mrs. Thatcher. You know a lot of what I wrote to Bush and what he discussed with Shevardnadze. I would like to inform you in a confidential manner, that the US President and I agreed that the next U.S.-Soviet summit will take place in the period no later than the end of the first half of the next year.

Thatcher: Thank you, Mr. President. This is good news.

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Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive]